

CLIFTON PRESERVATION DISTRICT

A Brief History

Introduction

Clifton conveys a sense of historic transition in a way that few other areas in Louisville can. The architecture of Clifton conveys the transition between the period of development of Louisville's large farms to the city's more intensive industrial developments of the late nineteenth century. The ambience of this Victorian community is still evident in its diverse architecture and unusual topography. It remains as one of the most interesting of the working-to-middle class Victorian neighborhoods in Louisville.

Farm-related Activities

Before the 1830s, when the area was still primarily rural in character, large landowners in Clifton fell into two categories: Gentleman farmers and truck farmers. Clifton's earliest and most influential settler was gentleman farmer, Colonel Joshua B. Bowles, who built an estate east of town between 1817 and 1842, and named it "Clifton". It is from the Bowles/Clifton estate that the surrounding neighborhood derives its name. The Bowles estate (demolished circa 1970) is believed to have been the only gentleman farm sited in what is now the Clifton neighborhood. There are records of at least three truck farming families who owned land and had homes in Clifton before 1860: The Rastetters, the Westermans and the Raymonds. Only one home has survived to the present day: the Thomas Rastetter House.

All of the historic farms known to have been in the present Clifton neighborhood, including the Rastetter house, reflect settlement patterns typical of the mid 1800s. In each instance the houses were sited a great distance away from the turnpike road, the primary means of access onto their property. This building placement differs from subdivision patterns that would emerge in later years and would often distinguish these earlier farm estates from the uniformity of later subdivision development.

Transportation

Two early nineteenth century transportation-related developments had a major impact on the neighborhood in terms of later development: the construction of a toll road (the 1830s Louisville and Shelbyville Turnpike which follows the path of present known as Frankfort Avenue) and the construction of a railroad (the late 1840s Louisville and Frankfort Railroad which facilitated the movement of goods and people to and from Louisville and beyond). Both shaped the Clifton neighborhood's physical expansion and commercial development. As the turnpike road and the rail line made areas east of the city more accessible, an increasing number of people moved out to the country.

Industry

Aside from the gentleman farms and truck farms that dotted Clifton's countryside in the mid-1800s, very little planned residential development had occurred. However, industries were emerging toward the southern boundary of the Clifton neighborhood. The employment opportunities these businesses provided had a profound impact on the residential development in the area. Several naturally occurring features contributed to the area's industrial development. Entrepreneurs took advantage of the constant water supply provided by the middle fork of the Beargrass Creek for distilling spirits and for the slaughtering and processing of meats, while the abundance of limestone attracted quarry men who slowly carved away huge chunks of hillside. Traces of the quarry industry are still visible, particularly in the area's southeastern quadrant, near present day Crescent Springs Condominiums, along the Interstate 64 corridor, and along Brownsboro Road at Kenilworth Avenue (now the site of a strip shopping mall). The City Workhouse, destroyed by fire in 1968, was another notable remnant of quarrying activity located in the adjacent Irish Hill neighborhood. The workers who found employment in these nearby slaughterhouses, quarries, and distilleries were the logical target for the marketing pitches of land speculators who geared their sales, and the prices of available homes, to these working class employees during Clifton's subdivision boom in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Additionally, by the 1880s, city-provided services such as police and fire protection, schools, and the availability of water, sewers and electricity, provided important amenities that would enhance the quality of life for potential homebuyers.

Land Subdivision

Subdivision development occurred in the Clifton neighborhood as early as the 1850s but it started out slowly. It wasn't until after the Civil War that the division of land and subsequent home building proliferated. Land subdivision in Clifton, following trends typical in Louisville, occurred first in the areas closest to the center city. In Clifton this meant the area to the west developed before areas to the east. Generally speaking, the earliest houses built in Clifton were the most modest in scale. As time went on, the housing stock gradually increased in size, scale, and durability.

Residential Development

Clifton is a product of development over a long time period and reflects a diversity of architectural styles. Pockets of houses that are obviously the result of rapid development by a single developer are characterized by identically sized lots upon which were built houses of nearly identical building size, scale, massing, and placement. Often, it is only signature details such as sunburst designs or fish scale shingles that distinguish one house from another. Wood is by far the most prevalent building material but brick, stone, and stucco can be found in Clifton as well.

Construction of Institutions, Schools, and Churches

As the population of Clifton increased so did the number of institutions, schools, and churches. The Kentucky School for the Blind (1853 and 1899), The Printing House for the Blind (1858 and 1883, with later additions), The Vernon Avenue School (1891 – 1919), Franklin Elementary School (1892, 1966), the Hook and Ladder Company #3 (____ - ____), The Sacred Heart Convalescent Home (1892), the German Evangelical Church/Clifton Unitarian Church (circa 1900), and St. Francis of Rome Catholic Church (1887 and 1910) and St. Francis of Rome Catholic School (1930) are all located within the boundaries of the Clifton Neighborhood. All were built in an attempt to provide a positive educational, spiritual, and social atmosphere for Clifton residents.

Commercial Development

Commercial buildings in Clifton are, for the most part, sited along the Frankfort Avenue corridor. Frankfort Avenue was never exclusively commercial or residential. In its early years commercial and residential development co-existed on Frankfort Avenue. Typical two-story brick and frame buildings with commercial ground level storefronts topped by storage or residential uses on the second floor were side-by-side with shotgun houses. Frankfort Avenue was the most traveled of all of Clifton's transportation routes and thus was the most highly visible to shopkeepers who attracted customers directly from the neighborhood as well as those just passing through on the toll road. All commercial buildings in Clifton are of modest scale. None exceeds two stories in height.

As the trend moved away from residential uses along Frankfort Avenue, circa 1910, many former homes were converted outright to commercial uses with little or no change to the building's main façade. In other instances, homes were altered at the ground floor level with new storefronts, additions were constructed where the front yard had been, or wholesale sheathing of all or part of the primary façade with a new "commercial-looking" skin occurred. The dates of these changes run the gamut from the late 1800s up to the present day. Those that were constructed between 1830 and 1953 have achieved significance because their architecture reflects historical changes in use and design. Thus, these buildings contribute to the district by showing the importance of Frankfort Avenue as a focus of commercial activity.

National Register Listings and Neighborhood Plans

Portions of the Clifton neighborhood were listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1883, based on the area's significance related to architecture, education, and industry. In 1994 the original district was expanded based on community planning and historic development studies. Additionally, Neighborhood Plans dating from 198? And 2003 addressed current conditions and future desires related to land use and transportation in the Clifton neighborhood. Findings from these plans should be highly regarded when neighborhood decision-making is proposed.

Preservation Principals

A number of guiding preservation principles modeled after the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation* are outlined below. Reading through these principles will help you begin to think about how you can carry out your upcoming project in a way that both enhances your historic building or site and preserves its character-defining features.

Relationships

When evaluating the appropriateness of a given project, the structure, the site, and their relationship to the rest of the district should be given careful consideration.

Use

Historic structures within a local preservation district should be used for their originally intended purpose or for an alternate purpose that requires minimal alteration to the building and site.

Alterations

Repair is always preferred over replacement. When replacement is necessary, materials should replicate or match the visual appearance of the original.

A high level of craftsmanship distinguishes structures within local preservation districts. Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques should be preserved whenever possible.

Removal or alteration of historic fabric compromises the original character of a building or site and should be avoided.

Properties, however, do change over time. Those alterations that have become historic in their own right should be maintained as a record of a resource's physical evolution.

New Construction and Additions

Additions should be designed to minimize impact to historic fabric and should relate to the main structure in massing, size, and scale.

New, infill construction should be designed so that it relates to its neighbors in size, massing, scale, setback, façade organization, and roof form.

New construction and additions should also draw upon established or new stylistic elements to create a sympathetic design that is clearly of its own era.

False-Historicism

Additions that use new or salvaged material to create a conjectural or falsely historical appearance are inappropriate.

Treatments

Chemical and physical treatments should always be as gentle as possible, since harsh methods like sandblasting can irreversibly damage historic fabric.

Archeology

Historic sites often contain archeological resources, which should be protected and preserved whenever possible. If artifacts are found, contact the Landmarks Commission for an assessment.

Reading Your Building – A Crash Course

Property owners planning to make exterior changes to a historic building should start by identifying the features and materials that give their structure its unique character, as well as its historic and non-historic elements. By taking the time to recognize and understand significant features, you will be much more likely to plan a project that is compatible with the original style of the building.

If, after looking over these guidelines, you would still like more information, the staff would be happy to arrange a pre-application meeting. Staff members can provide additional advice on the character of your building and how it relates to your upcoming project.

Learning to read a building and identify its significant elements is not complicated. Begin by thinking about and answering the questions below.

Step One

Identify the overall visual aspects of a building. Do not focus on the details, but on the setting and architectural context. Begin by working through the checklist below.

Shape

What is there about the form or shape of the building that gives the building its identity? Is it short and squat, or tall and narrow?

Roof and Roof Features

How does the roof shape or pitch contribute to the building's character? Are there unique features like weathervanes, cresting, or cupolas?

Openings

What rhythm or pattern does the arrangement of window or door openings create? Are there unusually shaped window openings or distinctive entryways?

Projects

Are there parts of the building that are character-defining because they project from the walls of the building like porches, cornices, bay windows, or balconies? Are there turrets, or widely overhanging eaves, projecting pediments, or chimneys?

Trim and Secondary Features

How does window and door trim contribute to the character of the building? Be sure to consider the decoration, color, or patterning of the trim. What about secondary features like shutters, decorative gables, and railings?

Materials

From a distance, what contribution do the color, texture, and combination of exterior materials make to the overall character of the building?

Setting

What aspects of the setting are important in establishing the visual character of the site? Think about the building's setback, alignment with adjacent buildings, plantings, fencing, terracing, and outbuildings, and its relationship to the street and alley.

Step Two

Identify the character of the building at close range. Assess the color and texture of the building materials as they convey the craftsmanship and age that gives the building its unique appearance. Begin by working through the checklist below.

Materials at Close Inspection

Are there one or more materials that have an inherent texture that contribute to the close-range character, such as stucco, exposed aggregate concrete, or brick textured with vertical grooves?

Craft Details

Is there high-quality brickwork with narrow mortar joints, or hand-tooled or patterned stonework? Are there hand-split or hand-dressed clapboards or machine-smoothed beveled siding? Craft details, whether handmade or machine-made, contribute to the character of a building because they are manifestations of the time in which the work was done and of the tools and processes that were used.